

THE
ARISTOCRACY IN
TWELFTH-CENTURY
LEÓN AND CASTILE

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CONTENTS

<i>List of maps</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>List of tables</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xiv
INTRODUCTION	I
1 LEÓN AND CASTILE IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY	8
2 CLASS, FAMILY AND HOUSEHOLD	28
3 THE LINEAMENTS OF POWER	67
4 THE NOBILITY AND THE CROWN	104
5 A WARRIOR ARISTOCRACY	148
6 PIETY AND PATRONAGE	185
CONCLUSION	221
Appendix 1 The counts of twelfth-century León and Castile	225
Appendix 2 Select genealogies	303
Appendix 3 Select charters	308
<i>Glossary of Spanish terms</i>	332
<i>Bibliography</i>	334
<i>Index</i>	354

MAPS

1	Western Spain and Portugal, <i>c.</i> 1150	<i>page</i> xvi
2	The Iberian peninsula at the death of Alfonso VI, 1109 <i>Source:</i> B. F. Reilly, <i>The contest of Christian and Muslim Spain</i> , 1031–1157 (Oxford, 1992)	10
3	The Iberian peninsula at the death of Alfonso VIII, 1214 <i>Source:</i> J. F. O'Callaghan, <i>A History of medieval Spain</i> (Ithaca, 1975)	24
4	Property acquisitions of Pelayo Froilaz, 1105–1127	74
5	Chief <i>tenentes</i> in the region of León, <i>c.</i> 1150	88
6	Itinerary of Alfonso VII, January 1146–February 1147	124

TABLES

1.1	Genealogy of the Leonese-Castilian Royal House	<i>page</i> 13
3.1	Property acquisitions of Pelayo Froilaz, 1105–1127	75
3.2	Aristocratic <i>fueros</i> from twelfth-century León and Castile	96
4.1	Office-holders in the household of Alfonso VII: 1. The <i>mayordomo</i>	143
4.2	Office-holders in the household of Alfonso VII: 11. The <i>alférez</i>	144
5.1	Lay witnesses to royal diplomas of 1137	176
5.2	Lay witnesses to royal diplomas of 1139	177
5.3	Lay witnesses to royal diplomas of 1147	178

INTRODUCTION

The past forty years have witnessed a transformation in our knowledge of the nobility of early medieval Europe. The prodigious efforts of French and German scholars, in particular, have made it possible to trace the origins and evolution of aristocratic groups across the early and central Middle Ages; to unravel the complexities of their family ties; and to analyse the distribution of wealth and power within their ranks. In short, they have enabled us to appreciate more fully the dominant role that was played by the lay aristocracy within medieval society as a whole.¹ Fruit of this endeavour has been the publication of a spate of learned books and articles.² While some of the most enlightening studies have taken the aristocracy of France and Germany as their theme, important advances have been made in other parts of Europe, too.³

It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that in a Spanish and, to be more precise, in a Leonese-Castilian context, the subject remains in its infancy. That is not to say that the aristocracy of the medieval kingdoms of León and Castile has never attracted the attention of scholars. The *eruditos* of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of whom the most eminent was perhaps Luis de Salazar y Castro, compiled numerous works whose purpose was to celebrate the illustrious past of some of the greatest noble lineages of the Iberian peninsula.⁴ Yet the example that was set by such

1 Although some writers have argued that 'aristocracy' and 'nobility' are not synonymous, common usage suggests otherwise. I make no distinction between the two in the pages that follow.

2 By far the best introduction to the vast literature is T. Reuter, ed. and trans., *The medieval nobility: studies on the ruling classes of France and Germany from the sixth to the twelfth century* (Amsterdam, 1979). There are also a number of relevant articles in F. L. Cheyette, ed., *Lordship and community in medieval Europe* (New York, 1968). There has been a timely review of recent research by L. Génicot, 'La noblesse médiévale: encore!', *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 88 (1993), 173–201.

3 For Portugal, for example, see J. Mattoso, *Ricos-homens, infanções e cavaleiros: a nobreza medieval portuguesa nos séculos XI e XII* (Lisbon, 1985) and, by the same author, *A nobreza medieval portuguesa: a família e o poder* (Lisbon, 1987). A stimulating guide to aristocratic mores in the British Isles is provided by D. Crouch, *The image of aristocracy in Britain 1000–1300* (London, 1992).

4 Typical of the genre is L. de Salazar y Castro, *Historia genealógica de la Casa de Lara*, 3 vols. (Madrid, 1696–7).

The aristocracy in twelfth-century León and Castile

admirable scholarly enterprise was not to be followed by succeeding generations. Studies devoted to the nobility of León and Castile became few and far between. The reason for this long-standing neglect is not hard to fathom. For, while the abundant documentation pertaining to the noble lineages of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries has provided the materials for a considerable number of important studies, the archives of the aristocratic families of the early and central Middle Ages have long since disappeared. The historian who wishes to study lay aristocratic society before c. 1300 must resign himself to a long and patient search for those scraps of information relevant to his purposes that have been preserved in church archives. It is hardly surprising that a good many scholars, faced with the vastly richer archival holdings of the episcopal sees and monastic houses of León and Castile, have chosen to devote their energies to the study of ecclesiastical institutions.

During the course of the past twenty-five years, however, it is fair to say that Spanish historians have tentatively begun a long overdue reappraisal of the aristocracy and its role in Leonese-Castilian society prior to the fourteenth century.⁵ Proof of this are the clutch of significant studies that have appeared.⁶ Some scholars, following firmly in the footsteps of the *eruditos*, have been particularly concerned to reconstruct the genealogical ramifications of certain important families.⁷ Others have begun to probe the character and concerns of the aristocracy as an élite social group. Thus, such diverse topics as kinship structure, landholding custom and ecclesiastical patronage have already been the object of illuminating analysis.⁸ Yet, so much more still remains to be done.

5 Seminal work was carried out by S. de Moxó, 'De la nobleza vieja a la nobleza nueva: la transformación nobiliaria castellana en la baja Edad Media', *Cuadernos de Historia* 3 (1969), 1-210; and Moxó, 'La nobleza castellano-leonesa en la Edad Media: problemática que suscita su estudio en el marco de una historia social', *Hispania* 30 (1970), 5-68.

6 A useful survey of recent literature on the subject is to be found in P. Martínez Sopena, 'La nobleza de León y Castilla en los siglos XI y XII: un estado de la cuestión', *Hispania* 53 (1993), 801-22. For a wider view, see M. C. Gerbert, *Les noblesses espagnoles au Moyen Age, XIe-XVe siècle* (Paris, 1994).

7 There have been a number of valuable studies by J. de Salazar Acha: 'Una familia de la alta Edad Media: los Velas y su realidad histórica', *Estudios Genealógicos y Heráldicos* 1 (1985), 19-64; 'El conde Fernando Peláez: un rebelde leonés del siglo XI', *AEM* 19 (1989), 87-97; 'Los descendientes del conde Ero Fernández, fundador del monasterio de Santa María de Ferreira de Pallares', in *Galicia en la Edad Media* (Madrid, 1990), 67-86; and 'El linaje castellano de Castro en el siglo XII: consideraciones e hipótesis sobre su origen', *Anales de la Real Academia Matritense de Heráldica y Genealogía* 1 (1991), 33-68. See also the studies by J. M. Canal Sánchez-Pagín, 'Elvira Pérez, condesa de Urgel: una asturiana desconocida', *AM* 4 (1981), 93-129; Canal Sánchez-Pagín, 'El conde don Rodrigo Álvarez de Sarria, fundador de la orden militar de Monte Gaudio', *Compostellanum* 28 (1983), 373-97; Canal Sánchez-Pagín, 'Don Pedro Fernández, primer Maestre de la Orden Militar de Santiago: su familia, su vida', *AEM* 14 (1984), 33-71. E. Fernández-Xesta y Vázquez, *Un magnate catalán en la corte de Alfonso VII: Comes Poncius de Cabreira, princeps Cemor* (Madrid, 1991).

8 The series of important studies by P. Martínez Sopena deserve particular mention: *La Tierra de Campos Occidental: poblamiento, poder y comunidad del siglo X al XIII* (Valladolid, 1985), pp. 327-422;

Introduction

This book is concerned with the characteristics of lay aristocratic society in the twelfth-century kingdoms of León and Castile. Its focus is broad. Rather than trace the political and economic fortunes of a single noble family across successive generations, as has been the typical *modus operandi* of many of those who have approached this subject hitherto, it seeks to highlight what have been called 'the complexities and diversities of aristocratic existence' in the period in question.⁹ It examines the unrivalled wealth, status and power that many members of the aristocracy enjoyed. And it explores the various roles that lay nobles were expected to fulfil: as family protectors, landlords, judges and administrators; as political leaders, courtiers and military commanders; and last, but not least, as patrons of the church.

The twelfth century was a period of profound political upheaval for León and Castile. Torn apart by civil war after the death of Alfonso VI in 1109, the realms were reunited and then dismembered once more by his grandson Alfonso VII, before finally being reunited by Fernando III, this time for good, in 1230. In the interim, León and Castile were frequently at one another's throats, jockeyed for power with their Christian neighbours, and also engaged in a titanic struggle for ascendancy with the successive Berber masters of al-Andalus (Muslim Spain), the Almoravids and Almohads. It was during this turbulent period that the nobility of León and Castile experienced a number of important changes. There is evidence, for example, that a handful of aristocratic families began to acquire an embryonic sense of lineage; the challenges and rewards presented by the struggle against Islam led some nobles to acquire properties and lordships far from their traditional centres of power; the

'Parentesco y poder en León durante el siglo XI: la "casata" de Alfonso Díaz', *SH* 5 (1987), 33–87; 'El conde Rodrigo de León y los suyos: herencia y expectativa del poder entre los siglos X y XII', in R. Pastor, ed., *Relaciones de poder, de producción y parentesco en la Edad Media y Moderna* (Madrid, 1990), pp. 51–84; 'Monasterios particulares, nobleza y reforma eclesiástica en León entre los siglos XI y XII', in *Estudios de Historia Medieval en homenaje a Luis Suárez Fernández* (Valladolid, 1991), 323–31; 'Relations de parenté et héritage wisigothique dans l'aristocratie du royaume de León au XIe siècle', in *L'Europe héritière de l'Espagne Wisigothique* (Madrid, 1992), pp. 315–24. Other significant studies are M. C. Carlé, 'Gran propiedad y grandes propietarios', *CHE* 57–8 (1973), 1–224; C. Estepa Díez, *La nobleza leonesa en los siglos XI y XII* (Astorga, 1984); M. E. García García, 'Monasterios benedictinos y aristocracia laica en Asturias (siglos XI y XII)', in *Semana de historia del Monacato cántabro-astur-leonés* (Oviedo, 1982), pp. 195–233; M. I. Loring García, 'Nobleza e iglesias propias en la Cantabria altomedieval', *SH* 5 (1987), 89–120; M. I. Pérez de Tudela y Velasco, *Infanzones y caballeros: su proyección en la esfera nobiliaria castellano-leonesa* (Madrid, 1979); E. Portela and M. C. Pallares, 'Elementos para el análisis de la aristocracia altomedieval de Galicia: parentesco y patrimonio', *SH* 5 (1987), 17–32; Portela and Pallares, 'Algunos problemas relativos a la evolución de las estructuras familiares de la nobleza medieval gallega', in J. C. Bermejo, ed., *Parentesco, familia y matrimonio en la historia de Galicia* (Santiago de Compostela, 1988), 25–39; and Portela and Pallares, 'Aristocracia y sistema de parentesco en la Galicia de los siglos centrales de la Edad Media: el grupo de los Traba', *Hispania* 53 (1993), 823–40.

9 J. T. Rosenthal, *Nobles and the noble life, 1295–1500* (London, 1976), p. 18.

The aristocracy in twelfth-century León and Castile

concept of holy war made its influence felt in aristocratic circles; and lay patronage of the church took on novel forms.

Unfortunately, the sources for this enquiry leave much to be desired. For it is a striking feature of the meagre handful of historical works that were produced in León and Castile during the 500 years or so that separated the Arab invasion of the Iberian peninsula in the early eighth century and the Christian reconquest of most of al-Andalus by the middle of the thirteenth that for the most part the activities of the lay aristocracy feature so rarely in their pages. The majority of such writings, from the Asturian chronicles of the late ninth century down to the ambitious 'general histories' of Lucas of Túy and Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada in the first half of the thirteenth, were 'official' works of court historiography compiled at the behest of royal patrons and devoted almost exclusively to the deeds of the monarchs of León and Castile. By and large, the exploits of the lay nobles of the realm were virtually excluded from their gaze.¹⁰

One notable exception is the *Historia Compostellana*, which relates the history of the see of Santiago de Compostela during the period 1095–1139.¹¹ Commissioned by the then bishop of Compostela, Diego Gelmírez (1100–40), the *Historia* comprises both a collection of documents pertaining to the see, and a celebration of the deeds of Bishop, later Archbishop, Diego. It was a collaborative work, although just how many authors actually took part in its composition has been a matter for much debate.¹² The *Historia* is a narrative source of extraordinary value, for not only does it furnish the most detailed account of the political upheaval that followed the death of Alfonso VI in 1109, but it also provides a vivid portrait of Galician society in the first half of the twelfth century. It is particularly informative about the activities of the local aristocracy and its relations with the see of Compostela.

The second work of historical literature that is particularly illuminating for our purposes, is the anonymous *Chronica Adefonsi Imperatoris*, a panegyric in prose and verse dedicated to the deeds of Alfonso VII, from the king's accession in 1126 down to his conquest of the port city of

10 *Crónicas asturianas*, ed. J. Gil Fernández, with J. L. Moralejo and J. I. Ruiz de la Peña (Oviedo, 1985); Lucas of Túy, *Chronicon mundi*, ed. A. Schottus, *Hispania illustrata*, 1v (Frankfurt, 1608), pp. 1–116; Rodrigo Jiménez de Rada, *Historia de rebus Hispanie sive Historia Gothica*, ed. J. Fernández Valverde, CCCM, LXXII (Turnhout, 1987); hereafter referred to as DRH. The historiography of the period is dissected in masterly fashion by P. Linehan, *History and the historians of Medieval Spain* (Oxford, 1993).

11 *Historia Compostellana*, ed. E. Falque Rey, CCCM, LXX (Turnhout, 1988); hereafter referred to as HC.

12 On the composition and authorship of the *Historia*, see the discussion in B. F. Reilly, 'The "Historia Compostelana": the genesis and composition of a twelfth-century Spanish "Gesta"', *Speculum* 44 (1969), 78–85; HC, pp. ix–xxxiii; and F. López Alsina, *La ciudad de Santiago de Compostela en la alta Edad Media* (Santiago de Compostela, 1988), pp. 44–93.

Introduction

Almería in 1147.¹³ If, as has traditionally been supposed, the *Chronica* was the work of Bishop Arnaldo of Astorga (1144–52/3), then it is a near-contemporary witness to many of the events it describes.¹⁴ The *Chronica* is a striking piece of historiography: the providential tone of the work, which is reinforced by a pastiche of references taken from the Old Testament and the Apocrypha, portrays Alfonso VII ‘as the leader of a chosen people carrying out God’s holy task through battle’.¹⁵ Not only that, but the poetic rendition of the conquest of Almería, which follows the chronicle, is suffused with a strong crusading spirit. As far as this enquiry is concerned, the *Chronica* is an invaluable source, for it has much to tell us of the magnates who attended the court of Alfonso VII, of the military campaigns they waged on his behalf and, indeed, of the challenges that some of them mounted against his authority. Moreover, the chronicle’s poetic colophon, in the truncated form in which it has come down to us, consists largely of a lengthy and stylised description of the chief members of the lay nobility who took part in the Almería campaign of 1147.

To the information that we are able to glean from the twelfth-century chronicles, much more may be added from the evidence of contemporary charters. Thankfully, these have survived in relatively good number. First, there are the diplomas that were issued by the monarchs of León and Castile themselves. There are, for example, over 100 extant, genuine diplomas from the reign of Queen Urraca, at least 750 from that of Alfonso VII and over 1000 from that of Alfonso VIII.¹⁶ Some of these documents record the largesse that was lavished by the monarchs upon

13 ‘*Chronica Adefonsi Imperatoris*’, ed. A. Maya Sánchez, in *Chronica Hispana saeculi XII*, CCCM, LXXI.1 (Turnhout, 1990), pp. 109–248; hereafter referred to as *CAI*. For the poetic account of the conquest of Almería, see ‘*Prefatio de Almaria*’, ed. J. Gil, in *Chronica Hispana*, pp. 249–67; hereafter referred to as *PA*.

14 Matters of authorship are discussed by L. Sánchez Belda, ed., *Chronica Adefonsi Imperatoris* (Madrid, 1950), pp. ix–xxi; cf. *CAI*, pp. 112–15.

15 R. A. Fletcher, ‘Reconquest and crusade in Spain c. 1050–1150’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 37 (1987), 42.

16 Registers of most, but by no means all, of the diplomas of the Leonese monarchs, from Urraca to Alfonso IX, are to be found in M. Lucas Alvarez, *Las cancellerías reales (1109–1230): El Reino de León en la alta Edad Media*, v (León, 1993). Only the charters of the reign of Alfonso IX have so far been systematically edited: J. González, *Alfonso IX*, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1944), II; hereafter referred to as *GAL*. The chancery of Alfonso VII was the object of a detailed analysis by P. Rassow, who also edited some fifty-seven of the king-emperor’s diplomas: ‘Die Urkunden Kaiser Alfons’ VII von Spanien’, *Archiv für Urkundenforschung* 10 (1928), 327–467; 11 (1930), 66–137, henceforth Rassow. This should be supplemented by B. F. Reilly, ‘The chancery of Alfonso VII of León–Castilla: the period 1116–1135 reconsidered’, *Speculum* 51 (1976), 243–61; and Lucas Alvarez, *Las cancellerías*, pp. 87–314. Sixty-one charters of Fernando II were edited by J. González, *Regesta de Fernando II* (Madrid, 1943), hereafter referred to as *GRF*, pp. 241–341. The charters of Alfonso VIII of Castile have been edited by J. González, *El Reino de Castilla en la época de Alfonso VIII*, 3 vols. (Madrid, 1960), II–III; hereafter referred to as *GRC*.

The aristocracy in twelfth-century León and Castile

those nobles who had rendered them particularly valuable service. Almost all have a witness-list attached which provides a valuable record of the lay and ecclesiastical magnates who were in attendance at the royal court at the time the charter was issued.

In addition to the sizeable corpus of royal charters, there are a significant number of 'private' documents, issued to or by nobles: records of land conveyances, lawsuits, endowments to churches and monasteries, and so on. They shed a considerable amount of light on the social and economic concerns of the lay aristocracy during the period under study. And yet, even these documents pale in comparison with the far richer resources that are available to the historians of other regions of the West. Thus, while 113 acts issued by the Anglo-Norman magnate Count Waleran of Meulan and a further 75 issued by his brother Earl Robert of Leicester have so far come to light, the surviving documents granted by their contemporary, Count Manrique Pérez de Lara, who held the reins of power in Castile between 1161 and 1164, can be counted on the fingers of one hand.¹⁷ To compound matters, the documents that have survived to this day are desperately laconic: for example, they have practically nothing to tell us of the true extent of aristocratic patrimonies, nor of the way in which nobles organised their households and administered their lordships. As will become all too apparent in the coming pages, much of what we have to say must remain hesitant and tinged with doubt.

I am acutely aware that the essay which follows is not without its shortcomings. For one thing, some important areas of aristocratic activity do not receive the detailed scrutiny they doubtless deserve. The active political role of the nobility, for instance, which is at its clearest during the near anarchy of much of Urraca's reign and the turmoil of the minority of Alfonso VIII, warrants far more attention than can be afforded here. Other subjects, such as the relationship between the nobility and the crown and the church respectively, could likewise have occupied a book in their own right. In other respects, the chronological limits of this study impose restrictions of their own. Changes in aristocratic life and behaviour could take many generations to crystallise and sometimes need to be viewed from a much wider perspective if they are to be fully appreciated. It is also a source of regret that the activities of aristocratic women receive such limited attention in the pages that follow, although this is to be attributed less to some wilful act of misogyny on the author's part, than to the fact that with the exception of their numerous acts of piety, their lives remain almost a closed book to

¹⁷ D. Crouch, *The Beaumont Twins: the roots and branches of power in the twelfth century* (Cambridge, 1986), p. xi. For details of the *acta* of Count Manrique Pérez, see Appendix 1, pp. 264–5.

Introduction

us. Notwithstanding these reservations, it is my modest hope that this book may at least serve to encourage others to research further in this field and that it will prove of more than passing interest to students of the aristocracy of other regions of the medieval West.

Although the principal aim of this book has not been to provide an in-depth study of the fortunes of the greatest lay families of the kingdom, it is hoped that the prosopographical material that is included in the Appendix will provide future researchers in this field with a useful resource. Moreover, the fact that we know so much more about the interests and activities of the magnates of the realm, who travelled regularly to the royal court and led military expeditions on behalf of the crown, who enjoyed the most spectacular concentrations of landed wealth, and who, collectively, constituted the most important patrons of the church, means that the names of certain prominent lay figures, such as the Laras of Castile or the Trabas of Galicia, crop up repeatedly.